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Brandy Station: A Battle Like None Other

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Review

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Crouch, Richard E. *Brandy Station: A Battle Like None Other*. Willow Bend Books, \$28.00 ISBN 1585497975

Great bloodbath of chivalry

Comprehensive analysis reveals details of clash

In his 1732 military writings Marshall of France Maurice Comte de Saxe wrote of cavalry: "Altogether, cavalry operations are exceeding difficult, knowledge of the country is absolutely necessary, and ability to comprehend the situation at a glance, and an audacious spirit, are everything."

Since the Civil War was primarily an infantry and artillery war, there were few opportunities for grand and glorious large-scale mounted battles between opposing cavalry forces. The cavalry battle at Brandy Station, Virginia, on June 9, 1863, however, was an exception, and it proved that Marshall Saxe was right.

Brandy Station was a cavalry battle involving approximately 10,000 Confederate and 10,000 Union horsemen, several batteries of horse artillery, and minimal infantry participation (on the Union side). Richard Crouch's new book, **Brandy Station: A Battle Like None Other**, is an ambitious attempt to make sense of a confusing melee of charge and counter-charge where the saber and pistol were the weapons of the day, and where one side knew the ground and the other did not.

Virginia author Richard Crouch has written two other books of Virginia history. One is a slim volume, now out of print, called *Rough-Riding Scout*, about John W. Mobberly, a Loudoun County guerrilla in the Civil War. The other book is *The Virginia Gentleman: A Field Guide, An Owner's Manual, A History, And A Way Of Life* (Elden Editions, 1999).

With **Brandy Station** Crouch presents a detailed picture of "the largest cavalry battle ever fought on the American continent. Confederate cavalry had always seemed superior to Union cavalry in all traditional cavalry roles -- patrols, raids, screening operations, reconnaissance, and pursuit. However, at Brandy Station the Union cavalry showed it could ride and fight as aggressively and boldly as the Confederates. Never again would Confederate horsemen hold the Union cavalry in contempt.

Using diaries, official reports, newspaper accounts, and eyewitness statements, Crouch analyzes the battle from its initial planning, through the daylong combat, to the aftermath of victory and defeat. General Alfred Pleasanton was the new Chief of the Cavalry Corps in the Union Army. In June 1863 General Joe Hooker ordered Pleasanton to cross the Rappahannock River and move on to Culpepper, Virginia. His goal was to find General Robert E. Lee's army and determine its intentions.

As Crouch relates, Pleasanton massed his cavalry, all 10,000 men, and crossed the river, completely surprising the Confederate cavalry pickets posted as a screen. However, Pleasanton did not know until too late that his opponent was General J.E.B. Stuart. By a stroke of luck, Stuart had also massed his Confederate cavalry in the vicinity, preparing to screen Lee's upcoming bold invasion north into Pennsylvania (and Gettysburg).

The collision of these huge cavalry forces was "the last great bloodbath of warlike chivalry," as cavalry regiments and brigades became mixed up in a mounted donnybrook of flashing sabers, smoking pistols, and choking dust. Stuart was initially surprised by the Union attack, but he reacted quickly, moving units and artillery to the critical sectors of the battlefield in a desperate effort to thwart Union thrusts.

The Union fought bravely and stubbornly, but finally withdrew back across the river at day's end. Crouch recounts the actions of units and individuals on both sides -- identifying heroes, and highlighting decisions, mistakes, and missed opportunities. The best cavalymen were at Brandy Station, including Rooney Lee, Wade Hampton, John Buford, and George Custer, as well as Major Robert F. Beckham. Beckham was the artillery officer who Stuart credits with saving the day for the Confederates.

Crouch also analyzes leadership decisions and the typical scapegoating that follows all battles. However, for a book with great potential, **Brandy Station** is burdened with poor editing, clichéd narrative, unnecessary appendices, and inadequately reproduced maps. The overall poor quality of production detracts from what would otherwise be a solid piece of historical appraisal.

William D. Bushnell, a retired Marine Corps colonel, is a freelance writer, book reviewer, and instructor at the University of Southern Maine. He lives on an island on the coast of Maine.